

# Back to First Base on Gan

Our Commonwealth Affairs Correspondent outlines the background to the dispute over Britain's staging post in the Maldive Islands.

By

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**N**EXT month the £4m (it was to have been £2m) R.A.F. staging base on Gan Island, Addu Atoll, Maldives, will be finished and ready for use in place of Katunayake, which has been handed over to the Ceylon Government. Unfortunately an 18-month-old dispute with the Maldivian Government, which has tried every device to stop the construction, is still unsettled.

There is still hope of agreement just in time, but if none is reached a situation which is already embarrassing will become decidedly awkward.

Matters are further complicated by the fact that the people of Gan and the surrounding islands, rather than bite the feeding hand of the R.A.F. as their Government ordered them to do, revolted and established the so-called United Suvadive Republic, with a population claimed to be 30,000.

They have never known such prosperity, temporary though it may be to some extent, as has been brought by the building of the base. The simple islanders look on the R.A.F. as their "Uncle" and were only with difficulty restrained from adopting the R.A.F. flag as their national standard. The Maldivian central Government in Malé, 200 miles away, sent a punitive expedition to one of the outlying rebel islands, but this withdrew after inflicting casualties.

## Farical Imbroglia

**W**HAT is the cause of this imbroglia, with its many farical elements? Is Britain, as the Maldivian Government alleges, riding roughshod over the rights of a tiny State of 90,000 people scattered over 2,000 minute islands? Is it a case of attempted blackmail by the Maldivians, or just slipshod legal work by the British departmental experts?

The answer is made difficult by the fact that the inventiveness of official Maldivian accusations against Britain is matched only by the long-suffering reticence of the Commonwealth Relations Office, the reason for which is said to be anxiety not to give offence and thus imperil negotiations which are indeed delicate.

The Maldives have long been a British Protectorate. This status was eventually formally recorded in 1887 in an agreement which has since been confirmed at regular intervals, the last occasion being 1957. They have full internal self-government, Britain being responsible for defence and all foreign relations. The islands were a Sultanate until 1953, when they became a Republic, only to revert a year later to a Sultanate, which is their present status.

There was a British airfield on Gan during the war. In 1956, owing to difficulties over Katunayake, it was

decided to re-activate and enlarge the base. The Maldivian Government gladly agreed, and a lease was initiated by both Governments in the form of a Heads of Agreement.

In January 1957, the Maldivian Government made a public statement expressing its pleasure at the agreement and its "deep gratitude" to Britain for having always so scrupulously fulfilled the conditions of the Protectorate. Shortly afterwards work on the base began.

## Driving a Bargain

**A**T the end of 1957 a new Prime Minister took over in the Maldives, and entered into negotiations with Britain on what was described as the "implementation of the agreement." Stolid silence was maintained by the British Government, but it gradually became clear that the Maldivians were bargaining for better terms. It also looked very much as if, as time went on, these terms were becoming stiffer.

Only recently has there been a statement on behalf of the Maldivian Government stating the terms of the original lease and its present demands. The British Government would go no farther than admitting that the facts as stated were correct.

The original lease of Gan as a base was apparently for 100 years. The Maldivians want to whittle this down to 15. Britain seems willing to accept 30. The agreed rent was £2,000 a year. The Maldivians are now asking for £100,000. There is also some disagreement on the exact conditions under which, in the event of hostilities, the base could be used, indicating a spread of "neutralism" from neighbouring Ceylon.

The Maldivians also claim recognition of full sovereignty, but would in practice allow Britain to conduct their "political" foreign relations, but not trade, cultural and other foreign relations. Two months ago the British Government proposed (but did not publish) a declaration on this subject. It went a long way towards meeting the Maldivian demand, but evidently not far enough, as the Maldivian Government broke off the negotiations. Efforts are now being made to re-open them through an intermediary.

## Rice and Riots

**M**EANWHILE the Maldivian Government was attempting to put a stop to work on the base. The labour force consisted of 1,200 Pakistanis and about 500 islanders doing mainly domestic jobs.

It had been arranged, that the islanders' wages would be paid in sterling by the R.A.F. to the Maldivian Government, which would issue it in rice and local currency.

The Maldivian Government ordered the islanders to stop working on the base, arguing that they were neglecting their normal pursuits and would be left stranded when the base was finished. The islanders produced figures showing that their normal occupations, mainly fishing, were being maintained.

The Government then withheld rice and pay arrears. The Maldivian delegate in the negotiations with Britain took advantage of a recess to visit Gan and exhort the islanders to stop work on the base. He was chased by a crowd, and rescued by the R.A.F. and brought away to safety. In the turmoil Government buildings were destroyed by the mob.

Disturbing reports began to come in of deaths from starvation in the islands around Gan owing to the withholding of rice supplies by the Government. British offers to send help were rejected, but in March an R.A.F. expedition established that deaths were occurring, and food supplies were sent, despite official Maldivian protests.

In March came the revolution, centred on Gan, which the Maldivian Government alleged was fomented by Britain. This accusation was rejected by the Earl of Home, Commonwealth Relations Secretary, in a statement in Parliament.

## Moral for Britain

**A**T the same time Britain refused requests for recognition from the highly co-operative United Suvadive Republic and gave the Maldivian Government what amounted to an assurance that, in accordance with the policy of non-interference in Maldivian internal affairs, no such recognition would be granted.

The British case, although it has not been stated publicly, is that by international law and precedent a Heads of Agreement, once initiated, is binding and that final ratification—which has not yet taken place—is a matter of form and filling in details.

On the face of it the conditions in the original agreement look rather stingy, although unspecified sums appear to have been paid to the Maldivian Government for resettlement of population.

If the Maldivians now have the good sense to recognise a good bargain when they see one they will have done well out of Britain's original underestimate of their astuteness followed by her excess of gentlemanly reticence in subsequent negotiations.

The moral for Britain is: Do not start building your base until the lease is signed, sealed and delivered. Or, if you are in a hurry, build it somewhere where you are in full control.